

The Essex Hall Lecture 1985

**THE
UNITARIAN
MOVEMENT:
Projections and Realities**



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This is the Essex Hall Lecture for 1985, and was delivered in Dundee, Scotland, on April 11th, 1985. Essex Hall is the headquarters of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, and stands on the site of the building where the first avowedly Unitarian congregation met over two hundred years ago. The lecture was founded in 1892, and many distinguished persons in various fields have contributed to the series. The delivery of the lecture is one of the leading events during the General Assembly's Annual Meetings.

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The Unitarian Movement: Projections and Realities

Dr. Duncan Howlett

NEEED I SAY HOW GREATLY HONORED I AM to stand in the succession of speakers who have addressed this assembly down the years as the "Essex Hall Lecturer". My gratitude for your invitation is profound, not only for the distinction you confer upon me, but also for the opportunity it provides to speak to you.

The reports of your General Assembly that have appeared in *The Inquirer* in recent years are not very reassuring. Apparently a great many of you look upon this lecture, not as the intellectual climax of your deliberations as it was intended to be, but as an exercise in boredom to be endured and forgotten as soon as it is over. I should like to make this year an exception, if possible, for there are important matters an assembly like this might consider.

Our denominational vitality here in Great Britain, in North America and world wide leaves a lot to be desired. While Christian Evangelicalism and Islamic fanaticism prosper, we Unitarians languish, our numbers perhaps constant, but our prestige and our former impact on the wider religious community quiescent if not at an end.

Why? What ails us? I have an answer to suggest. With your indulgence, I should like to go further and propose a plan of action. Not all of you will like it, be sure of that. Many will reject out of hand both the analysis and the remedies that seem to me to suggest themselves. But no matter. If a debate should result, that will be just fine, and the hotter the better.

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I The Problem

Roughly speaking, the loss of vitality that characterizes our movement has been in evidence for a century or more, since the second half of the Nineteenth Century. Since that time there has been some elaboration and clarification of theological issues then under debate, but little more. In the United States the basic issue emerged clearly in 1866. At the first annual meeting of the newly organized National Conference of Unitarian Churches held at Syracuse, New York, the Preamble to the proposed Constitution was under debate. The main body of delegates wanted the Preamble to state that the denomination was under the "Lordship of Jesus". A minority, under the leadership of Francis Ellingwood Abbott, felt very strongly that any such declaration was too dogmatic for the Unitarians. As a substitute, Abbott proposed the following: "The object of Christianity is the universal diffusion of Love, Righteousness and Truth." A solid majority favored the more traditional language, however, adopted it formally, and the minority departed from the Conference to form a new organization of their own which they called the Free Religious Association.

I will not burden you with more history since our object is not to review the past but to look at it, then at the present and see what both have to indicate about the future. For Unitarian Universalism in North America the present is very enlightening in view of the struggle at Syracuse in 1866. What was then thought to be radical and divisive is now on the way to being written into the Constitution and By Laws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. We in North America have just concluded a lengthy review of our Principles and Purposes as stated in our By Laws. After extensive study and debate we preliminarily adopted new language at our General Assembly at Columbus, Ohio last June. If you have not seen it, you will find the statement upon which we finally settled very illuminating in the light of the debate that began with Emerson and Parker a hundred and fifty years ago and reached its first institutional climax in 1866.

It reads: We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- ★ The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- ★ Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

- ★ Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregation;
- ★ A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- ★ The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- ★ The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
- ★ Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- ★ Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- ★ Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- ★ Wisdom from the World's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- ★ Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- ★ Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

You will notice that the Declaration of Principles falls into two main divisions. The first is a "covenant to affirm and promote" certain things, most of which most religious people would also affirm and promote. Such differences as might appear would rise from a different understanding of precise word meanings. The second major division delineates the various sources from which the Unitarian Universalist Association of churches declares that it draws its living tradition. Here basic differences with other religious groups in American society are no less hard to find. Few of the mainline churches

would have difficulty affirming that their present living tradition was derived in part from "direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder affirmed in all cultures; the words and deeds of prophetic men and women; wisdom from the world's religions (ie., non-Christian religions); and humanist teachings on the guidance of reason and the uses of science".

The one element in the North American list of sources from which that living tradition is said to be drawn on which the mainline churches would sharply differ is the fourth, which reads: "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbor as ourselves". While the mainline churches would agree that the Golden Rule is paramount among Jewish and Christian ethical teachings, both would differ sharply with the idea of singling out this particular teaching as uniquely significant among all the others that are to be found in either tradition. Both would also object to the idea of a single Judeo-Christian moral precept as one among many sources of their particular tradition. In contrast with the very broad American Unitarian Universalist list of sources, both Judaism and Christianity would emphasize the richness of their own tradition and the central place of that tradition in any list of the sources out of which it had been formed.

The point is, both Judaism and Christianity would find little in the North American statement to quarrel with. Both would claim virtually all of it. But having acknowledged input from sources outside their own tradition both would go on to emphasize the centrality of their own religious roots. Both would concede that the Unitarian Universalist statement is all right as far as it goes but that it does not begin to go far enough.

If the North American statement of Principles and Purposes does not make the difference between the Unitarian Universalist position and that of the mainline churches sufficiently clear, did it mark an advance in our denominational thinking? Not really, it seems to me. What it did do was to establish the position of the movement theologically at the point where the Free Religious Association tried to establish it over a hundred years ago.

And yet there is a sense in which the North American statement can be seen as a significant, albeit an unintended

step backward, theologically speaking. As we noted, the statement asserts that the Unitarian Universalist association draws its living tradition from many sources, among them "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life".

Think about that for a moment. If those words mean what they seem to mean, we have here the elements of a theological affirmation. All of us can agree that what we call religious experience occurs very widely among all people, including Unitarians. But as soon as you begin to delineate the nature of that experience willy-nilly you are into theology whether you mean to be there or not.

Let us put the question directly. How many of you would agree that a religious experience is a "direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder"? What is the mystery you experience? Most of us would have quite different notions as to how that question should be answered. Then there is that adjective "transcending". That means "above and beyond the universe or material existence". How many of you are willing to affirm that? Many of you, no doubt. But many more would not.

The North American statement further describes the transcending experience as one that "moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life". Are we ready to affirm officially as Unitarians that such forces exist and that they move us to a renewal of the spirit? What are these forces? What is the spirit, the existence of which this declaration acknowledges? Our answers to these questions would vary. And as Unitarians would we not agree that that is the problem? Statements like these are theological in nature and do not belong in an official Unitarian declaration of Principles.

It is very easy to stand off and criticize the hard work someone else has done and I do not wish to be cast in that rôle. Given the complexity of the problem and the variety of theological opinion that prevails in the North American Unitarian Universalist movement they could hardly have done better. The Commission on Principles and Purposes is to be commended for achieving a statement that was adopted virtually by acclamation. Nevertheless, now that the process is complete, or nearly so, it behooves us to have a look at the

result, to try to see it for what it is, to assess its worth and to see, if we can, what it may indicate for the future.

When we do this, we discover to our dismay that the process by which by-laws are adopted by any religious group, in particular one that is democratically organized, comes dangerously close to the process by which the creeds of Christendom were adopted in the early centuries of our era. A proposal designed to resolve a theological issue is written out, debated, modified and ultimately adopted by an authoritative body. How else can it be done — unless by a decree issued by a single individual? The long process followed by the North American Unitarian Universalist Association shows how difficult it is in religious matters to find language upon which people can agree. In my mind it also shows how difficult it is to say anything at all without becoming theological and therefore ultimately credal, the very thing the Unitarians most want not to do.

Institutionally then, at least in North America, we seem now to be moving in the wrong direction. Although we are saying to one another and to the world that ours is a non-doctrinal approach to religion, institutionally we seem to be moving toward a statement of our position in doctrinal terms. While we declare explicitly that we do not bind anyone by our declarations, we are nevertheless marked by those declarations or they are meaningless and the elaborate process by which we arrive at them is futile.

There is a further problem, an old and continuing one, which the new statement of Principles with its theological overtones only accentuates. The movement to which we all belong, American, Canadian, British and others elsewhere, does not strike those outside our movement as being very different from that of other liberal churches. Many Unitarians would also agree. There is little excitement within our ranks generally and seemingly none on the part of the general public with regard to us. We are no longer seen as theological leaders out on the cutting edge, a threat to the stability of the standing religious order. In fact, such theological excitement as there is today lies elsewhere. Yesterday it was with the Death of God and Christian secularist movements; today it is with the Christian Evangelicals and the Eastern sects.

What of British Unitarianism? It is not for me to attempt a

statement of the situation here, but to an American observer it appears that, like us across the Atlantic, you have not moved far in recent years, theologically speaking. To be specific, who, would you say, has advanced Unitarian thinking beyond the point to which James Martineau brought it in his *Seat of Authority in Religion*, published in 1890? All of you recall the late John Robinson and the sensation he created with his little book *Honest to God*. He was not a sectarian radical. He was a bishop of the Church of England. In subsequent writings, he retreated from the extreme position he took in *Honest to God*, but he was never censured. No one thought of excommunicating him. He had only given voice to liberal views which prevailed in the Anglican Church generally, and were accepted by most lay people.

You are familiar with the SPCK book *Christian Believing, A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England* published in 1976. Professor A.C. Adcock, in a review in *Faith and Freedom*, says this official statement of faith by a Commission of the Church of England "does not tell Christians what they ought to believe There is no question of 'intellectual obedience' or the need to punish or evict the unorthodox. This is much more an essay about how to *do* theology," Adcock continues, "how to integrate one's religious experience and commitment with intellectual and emotional honesty and how to talk about one's religion in the light of all the other truths, insights, derived from other disciplines It is almost completely open minded," Adcock concludes. "It deals with believing rather than belief It deals with the *problems* of justifying faith rather than with the solution of such problems." Because of the open-mindedness of the Report, Adcock concludes, some critics have hinted that the Chairman, Professor Wiles, may be a Unitarian in disguise.

You may feel that that is a compliment to us. We do indeed strive for open-mindedness even if we do not always achieve it. But a very serious question arises. We chose and proclaimed a position of open-mindedness in religion long before the Anglicans. Two hundred years ago Joseph Priestley was driven from your shores to ours by that same Anglican Church because his open-mindedness was offensive to its people. Yet the movement Priestley and the others began continued on. We today are the descendents of those bold spirits. But that was another day. The reforms our forebears sought have now been achieved. That being so, should we not now rejoin the

great established Church and lend our strength toward its continuing reform? Given the fertile ground indicated by the Commission's Report, would we not accomplish more there than carrying on as we are with our few little scattered churches? It is a sobering question.

Is there then no real difference between us and the liberals who dwell contentedly in the mainline churches in your land and ours across the Atlantic? Are they right when they ask wherein we differ from them on anything really basic? "We are as liberal as you," they tell us. "We acknowledge the importance of other religions. Like you, we too seek rapprochement with them. True, we sail under the Christian banner," they continue. "After all, that is who we are. To be sure, we use the ancient practices and creeds of our church, but we interpret them very freely and we do not feel bound by them literally. Our history shows, as yours does," they continue, "steady movement toward broader concepts, a deeper understanding of the impact of modern thought upon ancient tradition, and an increasing readiness to modify our theological position accordingly."

What do we say to all of this? It isn't enough to reply that we are a little broader than they or that we go further in de-emphasizing Christianity and much further in acknowledging the importance of traditions other than our own. As a result we are driven to ask ourselves, many of us for the first time: What as a movement are the Unitarians really up to? What is our basic motivation? Are we a movement, the thrust of which has been to liberalize Christian doctrine? We are called Unitarians because we split with Christian orthodoxy on the doctrine of the Trinity, declaring that we believed in the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus. But was that all our forebears were saying? Was that all they cared about? Was that their motivation — to straighten out Christianity on one of its basic teachings? Certainly the main body of Christian churches thought so. But is that what those early Unitarians really cared about? More to the point — is that what *we* care about most?

II The Solution

Who then are we? How do we differ from other liberal religious groups? What is distinctive about us? Wherein lies our identity? I think there is an answer to this question. It is already present in our movement. In fact, it has long since been present and has often been voiced in different ways by our leading thinkers. In the time that remains I should like to lay before you what I believe to be the identity toward which all of the things we have said and done point.

If we go back to writers like James Martineau, L.P. Jacks and J. Estlin Carpenter we shall find that a common thread runs through them all, uniting them as a body of thinkers quite apart from the particular doctrines with which they might have been concerned. They were united, I suggest, by their common insistence on the *right* to say what they were saying and to do what they were doing. They were united in their demand that they be given the liberty to speak, as well as by their departure from traditional Christian dogma. In short, they are united by their common attitude toward all dogma.

All alike held that the formulation of theological ideas is not sacrosanct, that such formulations are transient, subject to growth and change as knowledge increases and human understanding broadens and deepens. That principle brought them all to the conclusion that churches should be non-dogmatic, the opposite of the Christian position. Churches must not be organized around a creed, they held. Creeds must not be allowed to become fixed and final. Interpreting them in the broadest possible manner as the Doctrine Commission recommends is still not enough. No creed is possible — none at all — because the formulation of religious ideas is to be expected constantly to grow and change.

This is what we have been saying and are still saying, or ought to be saying, as I see it: that credalism is not possible in any true church. We go yet further, or we should. We have been saying all along, and we should now be saying more clearly and forcefully than ever, that the teachings and the practice of any church — of any religious institution — our own included — must be subject to constant review and restate-

ment, constant broadening, widening, deepening as our human understanding grows.

There is little that is novel in all of this. We have been saying things like this for a long time. What we have not done, however, is fundamental. We have never clearly stated in so many words that this is who we are. We have never clearly said that our distinguishing feature is not that our doctrines are liberal, although they are — often so liberal that we are called secularists, agnostics, humanists, atheists and what not else.

Some one or another of us do in fact hold such doctrines. But we are not divided thereby. Our distinguishing feature is our attitude toward whatever doctrines are held by any church, including our own. We are distinguished by our belief that all doctrines and dogmas are at best formulations of what we think the truth may be. They are subject to constant review, change, development, improvement. This is who and what we are. It is this that distinguishes us, and it is time we stood forth and said so.

We are aware that our attitude toward official theological statements inevitably carries a negative connotation. Nevertheless, our position is positive, not negative. We say what we say and do what we do because of what we are *for* — not what we are against. And what is that? I have called it the "critical way" in religion. There are many ways in which we humans may go about the business of being religious. Without bogging down in definitions, I use the word religious here in the broadest sense. I suggest that in the Unitarian movement our way is the critical way.

I do not hold to this particular language. Unfortunately, the word critical further emphasizes the negative connotation that clings to our point of view and for that reason it is not altogether a happy choice. Even though it is derived from the Greek word "kritikos" which means "able to discern or judge", in the minds of most people the word "critical" has taken on the popular meaning of "inclined to criticize severely and unfavorably". Many people are unable to separate the term from that negative aura. The original Greek meaning, however — namely, the ability to discern or judge clearly, objectively and dispassionately, is an exact description of what I believe our goal and standard as a religious movement to be. If you can

help me find a better word — one that does not have any negative connotations — I shall be most grateful. Meanwhile, lacking a better, "critical" or "kritikos" — to keep to the Greek noun, as we speak of *mythos* and *ethos* — is the word I shall use.

And so I put this question to you point blank, as it were. Is this not who we are? Are we not a church which, in the total spectrum of things religious, seeks to follow the critical way? It should be clear that first and foremost we are a church in every sense of the word. We do what other churches do and unite with them in the rôle we would play as a religious institution. Like them we gather in fellowship to worship that which we believe to be the highest. Our concern for the welfare of our fellow creatures of all faiths is total: at least that is the ideal we cherish. Again, with all religions we seek to understand ourselves as persons, the universe in which we dwell and the meaning of life. In all of these rôles we are united with our fellow religionists everywhere. We differ from them all — and herein lies the contribution we make to the religion of humanity — we differ from all the others by following the critical way in all of our religious endeavors. We differ from them also, in our conviction that the critical way is the best way in religion, as it is in life. That is why we have chosen it.

In saying this we must be careful to point out that the critical way is the goal we pursue. Unhappily it is not as yet an attainment of which we can boast. Many of the members of our churches think of themselves as liberal Christians, as Christian Unitarians, Christian Universalists, as secularists, agnostics, humanists, atheists, what-not. Unfortunately, these designations are thought by many to be very important. In the wider religious community they are, specifically in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Quite naturally many of our people accept that thought pattern. They are accustomed to separate religious people along doctrinal lines, and for them, pluralism in religion is the answer. They hold that the Unitarian movement should claim pluralism as its distinguishing denominational mark. Ours is a kind of umbrella church, they say, within which people of differing theological persuasion dwell together in harmony and mutual tolerance.

And what is the matter with that? some of you may demand to know. We are pluralist in our theological views in point

of fact. Why not say so and be done with it? For one single fundamental reason: because pluralism in religion is theological and the characteristic that is most peculiarly ours is our *non*-theological stance. Pluralism divides people off from one another on the basis of their theological opinions. The critical way in religion unites them on the single principle of *kritikos*. We hold that in most cases theological views do not tell us what is important about people. At the theological level we hold the critical way to be the only valid approach to whatever set of theological ideas we may choose to hold. And I am asking you: is this not who we are? Is this not what we hold in common? Is not this conviction — that all theological views must be subjected to hard critical testing — is not this conviction central with each of us and is not that what we hold in common with one another?

I go further and ask: if this be so should we not say openly and clearly that we have adopted the critical principle as our way in religion? Should we not declare to the larger religious community in which we would have a place and play our part that this is who we are and that our advocacy of this principle is our contribution to the religion of humanity?

In fact, should we not go further still? Should we not also point out a distinctive aspect in the origin of our movement? Should we not begin saying more forthrightly than we have heretofore, that our religious roots, like most of the religions in Western culture, are in Jerusalem and Judea, but that they are in Athens as well? Do we not need to say more plainly than we ever have before, that the tradition to which we belong is Greek as well as Jewish and Christian? Are not our religious forebears Moses and Isaiah, Jesus and Francis, Luther and Calvin; but also Xenophanes and Socrates, Averroës and Erasmus, Cast-ellio; Tom Paine and Robert Ingersoll? We stand in a great tradition which we have largely ignored. We hardly know the names of the religious leaders who in earlier times sought to do in their generation what we would do in ours. We need to recall the bigotry they confronted, and the courage they had to demonstrate to hold to the position they took. We need to know the suffering many of them endured and the martyrdom that was the lot of all too many.

To do this would not be attempting to invent an identity for ourselves. It would not be a matter of scratching around in

history to find some plausible and respectable antecedents. It would be a matter of self discovery. It would be a matter of identifying those who have gone before us in whose debt we stand. We should learn who shaped the heritage we now enjoy. We should tell our children about them and let them be inspired by the originality of their thought and the nobility of their deeds.

If we know who we are; if we sense our unity and the common commitment that binds us together, let us state it with the boldness and clarity our forebears summoned. Within our denomination, both here and on the North American continent, we have been saying for a long time that the truth is not now and cannot be fully in hand, that truth-finding and truth-stating is, as far as we know, a never-ending process. We have said further: it is for this reason that we are a non-dogmatic, non-credal church.

If all of these things add up to the critical way in religion then let us say so. And as true followers of the critical way, we will not even be dogmatic about that. We will content ourselves with saying that as seekers of the most valid form of religion we can find, we have chosen the critical way as the best possible way to attain it. If there is yet a better way let those who believe they have found it step forward. Let them be heard. Let us give them our full attention. Let us weigh with the utmost care everything they say. But if we find their counter proposals wanting — if after all, the critical way still appears to be the best, let us stand forth and say so.

If we can agree that our way, distinctively, is the critical way we then face another question — one of enormous size and import which, no doubt, has been troubling you all along. After we have dealt with our religious opinions critically, do we have any opinions left? If so, what are they? And if our opinions are always being tested, revised, dropped or added to, how can we live by them? How can we ever know what to do or what to think?

The first and most profound discovery made by followers of the critical way in religion concerns the nature of truth. The critical mind sees truth, not as an Absolute off in the sky somewhere, but as a set of formulations made by human beings here on earth. For the critical mind, truth is not something

revealed from on high, truth is something we are always moving toward here and now. Truth is the best statement we can make about the Ultimate, the Really Real, the Absolute. As we follow the critical way our ability to formulate such statements widens and deepens. And so our body of knowledge and the convictions we derive from it also widens and deepens. In short, the whole corpus continually grows.

All right then: granting for the sake of argument that we humans possess a body of knowledge and of conviction steadily growing in scope and clarity as we work at it, what are some of the elements in it? Here are a few examples. For some few centuries now we have been exchanging the Bible story of creation for the idea of an expanding universe. At the same time we have been exchanging the Bible story of the origins of life and of humanity for the evolutionary view. We have also been exchanging the ancient idea of miracles for the concept of a universe in which deities do not intervene in the natural order of events.

In what sense can we be said really to believe in an expanding universe, in evolution, or in a relatively ordered non-miraculous world? In the same sense in which we believe the earth is not flat but a sphere: the same sense in which we believe in the law of gravitation, in relativity, in quantum mechanics, quarks or black holes. We believe these things because great minds equipped with great instruments, making use of the vast body of knowledge the human race has accumulated, have reached these conclusions. Critical minds have done this. In their thinking they have applied the critical standards we believe should be applied everywhere, religion included. We trust their work because their methods and their results are open for all to see, to check and to revise where revision seems to be necessary.

The opinions of these thinkers may vary as to detail. But for the most part they agree as to fundamentals. We believe the same is true for religion. We vary greatly from one another as to detail in our beliefs. But in fundamentals like evolution and the idea of an expanding universe, we are pretty much in accord. Meanwhile the debate continues as to which of the currently accepted formulations is the best. And as the debate continues, ideas grow, change, are modified or abandoned entirely as newer and better ideas emerge. Such is the body and content of our belief and such is the way it grows

and changes.

A further gnawing question persists and must be dealt with. Can ever-changing formulations of truth provide us with knowledge that is solid enough to depend upon? Can such fluidity provide us with guideposts by which to find direction for living? Criticism is necessary of course but criticism carried too far reduces religion to rubble, it is said. Certainties become probabilities and the dependability religion has always provided — the certainty we require for living — vanishes. But the critical mind finds no such dependability in the supposed certainties of religion. Ancient documents, sacred texts, creeds sanctified by centuries of use are not secure from doubt. Age does not render ideas reliable. Formulations of concepts and ideas are reliable, however, when they have been tested and retested, modified and changed, and so represent the accumulated wisdom of centuries tested in open debate.

We now chart our course in this manner in almost every area of life excepting religion. In child rearing for example — and what is more important than that? — the debate goes on as to what rules to follow and you and I have to decide what to do with our growing children even while the experts argue. I am only asking that we bring our religion up to date. I am saying that Unitarians are religious people who seek to do this. They are a people who strive in religion to do what they are accustomed to do in virtually every other aspect of their lives, to think in concepts that are contemporary, not ancient, and to grow and change as our concepts are clarified and improved.

People today follow the critical way in science and industry, in education and the arts, in economics and politics. At least most of them try to. That is the standard. That is the goal. If so, then I ask why not in religion? Why in religion do we cling to ancient texts, striving to hold to the old words while interpreting them for contemporary use? Why in religion do we cling to a mindset two thousand years old when in everything else we strive for the mindset of today or even tomorrow?

Conclusion

How are we to achieve the identity we seek? We have merely to back off and have a look at ourselves; to see ourselves as others see us. Despite our theological differences we have long been aware of a basic consensus that unites us in a common enterprise. We see it on every hand — in the sermons we preach, in the talks we give, in the books we write, and in sidewalk conversations. All we need do is get that consensus into language. How?

Let a great debate now begin amongst us. Let whomever will, come forward and say who and what we most uniquely are as Unitarians. Let there be no restrictions as to who may enter the lists. Let no committee be appointed. Let no commission of denominational leaders, however able and carefully chosen and however representative, be charged with the responsibility. That is the old way. We know its pitfalls all too well. Let everyone with an idea come forward. Let every proposal be heard, weighed and considered. Let every counter proposal be given an equal hearing and equal consideration, and on the basis of what we hear, let us move toward a consensus.

Let us now begin doing purposefully what we have always done instinctively, speak what is in our hearts, and hear with courtesy and serious intent what those who disagree with us have to say. Let the process go on, purposefully, with view to achieving agreement as to who we are, what we stand for, how we differ from other religious movements and what, that is distinctive, we would contribute to the religion of humanity. I suggest that, in contrast to almost all other religious movements, ours is distinctively the critical way in religion. What do you say?

Duncan Howlett



The Revd. Dr. Duncan Howlett was educated at Harvard, Emerson and Meadville Universities in the United States, practising law at first (Harvard: SB, 1928; LLB, 1931; STB, 1936) before entering the Unitarian ministry (Ordained: Salem, Massachusetts, November 17th, 1935). He has served four Unitarian congregations: Second Church, Unitarian, Salem, Mass. 1934—38; First Unitarian Church, New Bedford, Mass. 1938—46; First Church, Unitarian, Boston, Mass. 1946—58; All Souls Church, Unitarian, Washington, D.C. 1958—68, when he retired from the ministry. He held many major posts and positions in the American Unitarian Association and later the Unitarian Universalist Association, after the amalgamation of 1961. He has maintained an interest in Law and local government administration, having been a member of the D.C. Commissioners' Youth Council, 1959—64, Chairman of the D.C. Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1962—65, and a member of the D.C. Commissioners' Crime Council, in 1963, among other things.

Since his official retirement in 1968, he has acted as an Interim minister in Houston, Texas, Atlanta, Georgia, and Westport, Connecticut. He has received several denominational awards, as well as public citations for distinguished service to the National Wildlife Federation of America. He has a particular interest in forestry, having served on the committees and boards of many organisations concerned with ecological preservation. At the time of this Lecture, he was also the Dudlean Lecturer, at Harvard University.

P. T. O. for a list of some of Dr. Howlett's publications

Some of Duncan Howlett's published works:

Man Against the Church — The Struggle between Religion and Ecclesiasticism. Beacon Press, 1954

The Essenes and Christianity — An Interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Harper & Row, 1957

The Fourth American Faith — Harper & Row, 1964

No Greater Love — the James Reeb Story. Harper & Row, 1966

The Critical Way in Religion — Prometheus Books, 1980